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Literature as Influential Creation

One of the many reasons why Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has resonated with society throughout the last two hundred years is the fact that it addresses a variety of societal concerns. While there are many avenues that I could address, **I would argue that Mary Shelley is warning against the Enlightenment desire to pursue knowledge and creation without acknowledging that there may be consequences. However, it’s more than just the creation of an object or being, like the Creature/Creation, it’s the creation of literature, as well because the creation of literary texts and our reading of those texts can be just as dangerous as the physical act of creating an eight-foot tall being.**

It has been argued that with knowledge comes power, but does it? Or does it just cause suffering because the more one knows, the more one is aware of the world, and one’s role in that world? To what knowledge are we responsible for and how do we react to that responsibility? In addition, she is critiquing and warning against self-education without guidance of some sort. This may seem contrary to what one would expect from the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, but if we examine the characters of Walton, Victor, and the Creation/Creature we see that there are similarities on which Shelley is critiquing. All three were self-educated in a way that led to their future actions. It could be argued that the actions of the characters to seek knowledge (Walton seeking the North Pole, Victor creating the Creation, and the Creation simply becoming literate) without regard for the consequences (or realizing the effect and affect of their actions) is a direct critique of those who were not guided in their education and were allowed to pursue whatever knowledge they desired. We can and should create our own knowledge and create new knowledge, but we must be aware of the possible results (positive and negative) of that pursuit.

Walton introduces us to the concept of self-education and the influence of one’s literary choices when he describes to his sister how his “expedition has been a favourite dream of [his] early years. [He had] read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the poles. You may remember, that a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas’ library” (52). From this short passage, we see how Walton’s current pursuit of the passage to the North Pole was greatly influenced by his reading habits since his early age. These unregulated readings led to an obsessive nature, where he “preferred glory” of being the person to claim the North Pole as his own accomplishment. These affections are even more extreme when he hear Victor’s story.

Knowledge, which is enhanced through created texts, directly changes both Victor and the Creature/Creation. Victor’s reading of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa has a profound affect on his perception of scientific thought and purpose. When he reads that they tried to discover what creates life, his goal becomes continuing their work, even if they are no longer accepted scientists within the academic community of Ingolstadt. What we find in Victor’s relationship with these authors/scientists/creators is a perfect example of what happens when one is allowed to pursue knowledge without any guidance or boundaries. As the saying goes, just because you can, doesn’t mean that you should. I would argue that Shelley is reminding us of this at a time that was deeply concerned with the dangers of a scientific community that had enough technological advances to do and pursue whatever it wanted without regulation or thought of the consequences.

In addition, the Creature/Creation’s experiences with becoming literate speaks to and comments on the society at large that was being more and more illiterate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Creature/Creation was ignorant before he reads and learns. Knowledge allows him to learn about society, but he also learns about the true, evil side of man. He becomes knowledgeable, but with that knowledge comes responsibility about what he now knows. He knows about the true nature of men, at least the nature that was portrayed in the books he read, but like a child, he connects too closely with one book in particular, *Paradise Lost*. He wants to see himself in a character – he chooses either Adam or Lucifer. However, he reconciles that he is like neither character because they each had companions and he is entirely alone. Along the lines of increased knowledge and ignorance about the reality of society and human nature, the Creature is naïve when he believes that the de Lacey’s will love him and accept him if he becomes educated and can speak their language. Through becoming literate and learning from the De Laceys, as a surrogate family/father, the Creature could be argue to have become integrated, as D. W. Winnicott discusses. Winnicott explains that “as the self becomes established and the individual becomes able to incorporate and hold memoires of environmental care, and therefore to be capable of self-care, so integration becomes a more reliable state” (117). However, and as I would argue about the concerns about acquiring knowledge, Winnicott warns that “integration means responsibility, and accompanied as it is by awareness, and by the collection of memories, and by the bringing of the past, present and future into a relationship, it almost means the beginning of human psychology” (119-20). This integration becomes problematic because it is based on a naïve fantasy where the Creature believes that the family will be accepting, like he has read in his books.

While the blind father does not immediately reject him because he cannot see the Creature, the children react as any human being would be expected to act, especially at that time. Unfortunately, the Creature is quickly brought down to reality when Felix beats him and shows him that humanity has a dark side. This is an important and influential lesson in the novel, one that could not be taught from books. As Corinne says when examining Italian sculpture, “it is useless to rely on the reading of history to understand the spirit of peoples” (141-42). While Corinne is focusing on the affect of sculpture, earlier in *Corinne, or Italy*, we see the same affect from literature when she performs *Romeo and Juliet*. This sentiment would have been useful for the Creature to understand because he believes that he knows everything about humanity by reading in books, until he experiences the true nature of man when Felix beats him.

However, what the Creature reads is very telling and allows us as readers to see how someone can be influenced and affected by the literature that they read. There is a direct correlation between what the Creation/Creature reads and his perspective on his life, Victor, and on how he reacts to the circumstances of his life. The main source of his despair comes from reading *Paradise Lost*. He sees himself as Adam because there is no one like him, but once he eats of the fruit of knowledge, as Eve did, he becomes like Lucifer. Knowledge does not give him power; knowledge only serves to make him more miserable. It is only in knowing that he cannot have what Adam and Lucifer have – companions and acceptance by others – that causes him to set out on his path of destruction. He mimics what he reads in *Paradise Lost*, as a child mimics the behavior of one’s mother as Winnicot mentions, by asking his creator for a companion, like Adam did when asking God for Eve, but when the Creature does not get what he wants from his creator, he rebels, like Lucifer.

The Gothic as a literary genre was and continues to be influential and was scary for many Romantics because of its ability to influence through its political and social commentary. Patrick Brantlinger discusses how the rise of literacy also coincided with the rise of the Gothic, which disturbed many in the literary world of the time because the Gothic was not high-brow writing and could not be suitable materials for young girls and boys. So, then is Mary Shelley’s creation of the Creation and the novel *Frankenstein*, an act of subversion? Does Mary Shelley create something (both a text and a character) that has the power to influence through critiquing social conditions and political institutions of the time?

While *Frankenstein* is rich with allusions to other texts and direct uses of literature, *Corinne, or Italy*, also speaks to the literariness of European Romantic society. However, it seems that the power of creation within Corinne’s world is subjected to the power of the audience. I also found it interesting when the characters critiqued and debated the value of each country’s literature. It seemed that Count d’Erfeuil lauded French as the best literature, while Lord Nelvil said that British literature is the best. Each debased Italian literature because of its overly emotional poetry, the lack of well-written prose, and the absence of tragedy plays. To me, it seemed that this section debated the difference between content and affect in literature. At the end, it was very clear that affect was the overwhelming winner when it comes to evaluating literature. Lord Nelvil’s reaction to Corinne’s performance shows how the play and her performance of it affected him so much that he believed he was in the play himself and that she was speaking to him directly. He was so affected that he stood up and reacted to what was being said as if it was reality. While it could be argued that his reaction was based on the performance, more than the words, it’s important to remember that all of Corrinne’s poetic refutations were both literary and performative, so in Italian poetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poetry mixed with performance to create the improvisational movement.